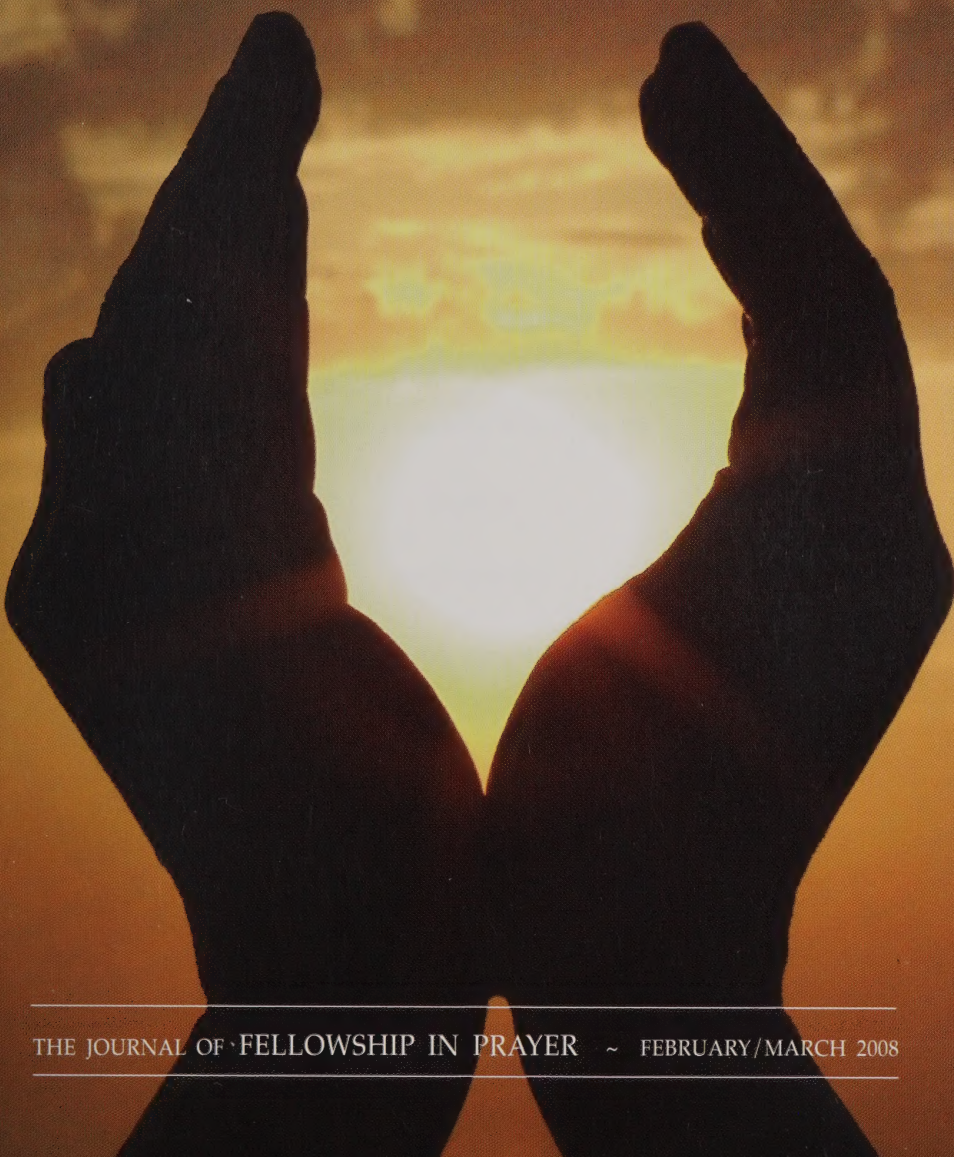


v.59, no. 1 (Feb / Mar 2008)

SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ FEBRUARY/MARCH 2008

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meditation,
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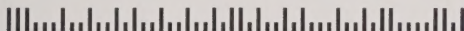
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Who is God?

Janet M. Haag



When my children were very young, I wanted the last thought held in their consciousness before they drifted off to sleep to be how much they were loved. I hope it has become a conviction they will hold onto for a lifetime. To foster their awareness, I used to run through the list of people who loved them. I would begin with, "Mommy loves you. . .Daddy loves you," and so on. For whatever reason, they started repeating the phrases after me. I always ended with, "God loves you." One night after sleepily repeating, "God loves me," my three year old daughter opened her eyes wide, and with great interest queried, "Who's God?" Ah, out of the mouths of babes come the most profound theological questions.

Who is God? And how do we begin to answer that question? We turn to faith and the various religious traditions that have guided human beings through the centuries; we turn to prayer and all sorts of spiritual practices. We listen for God in silence and solitude, as well as in the clamor of society; we look for God in the faces of those we love, and less frequently, catch a glimpse in the faces of those we consider our enemies; we

Janet Haag is Managing Director at Fellowship in Prayer.

encounter God “rustling about” in creation. We seek God in our churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and when all is said and done, we will hopefully someday come to the realization that God has already found us, has been with us all along, infusing us with the breath of life, enveloping us in a circle of love that is ever expanding. God is so much greater and more generous than any of us can conceive of God to be.

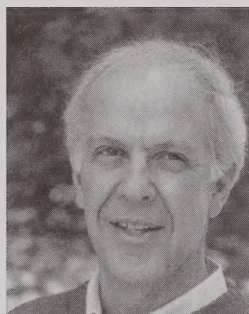
The journey toward discovery is certainly not all “sweetness and light.” There are times when we may not know where we are going. We lose our way or stumble and fall. We wander and wonder. There was a media flurry recently when letters of the saintly Mother Teresa revealed the depth of her spiritual doubts and struggles. Some people were incredulous that she could have ever questioned the very existence of the One to whom she had dedicated her entire life in service; for others, her “dark night of the soul” was the most significant indication of the authenticity of her faith, and an affirmation of the genuineness of their own spiritual quests.

It is our hope that in this issue of the journal, you will find wisdom to guide you on your way, support for your life of prayer and spiritual practice, as well as encouragement to keep asking anew, “Who is God?” knowing full well the answer encompasses and exceeds any of our definitions or experiences.

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

An Interview with

Parker Palmer



Parker Palmer, founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal, shares his quest for God and knowledge—though they don't always coincide, it has been his mission to find a common focus for his spirit-seeking heart and knowledge-seeking mind that will embrace reality in all its amazing dimensions. His focus on education as a spiritual journey has been deeply influential. We explore his teachings and contributions in this interview.

Fellowship In Prayer: In your book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, you mention that you eventually became a member of the Quaker Society of Friends. What drew you to embrace this particular faith tradition?

Parker Palmer: Well, let me say first of all that the official name of the group is the Religious Society of Friends, and the nickname is Quaker. The name was originally used in a derogatory fashion by outsiders who wanted to put down those who were members of the Society of Friends, but in typical Quaker fashion, they embraced this derogatory name as their own, thereby defusing any enmity. Here is a little background on how I became a Quaker. . . I was raised in the

If you are interested in learning more about the Center for Courage & Renewal please visit their website at www.couragerenewal.org

Methodist Church and was very active in its Youth Fellowship under a wonderful leader named Bert Randle. I then went to Carlton College where I studied religion, although I majored in philosophy and sociology. I was particularly interested in the sociology of religion and had a very close relationship with a wonderful college chaplain, David Maitland, as well as with some other marvelous professors of religion. Ian Barbour and Bardwell Smith are key among them. I then spent a year at Union Theological Seminary before going to Berkeley to complete a Ph.D. in the Sociology of Religion under Robert Bellah, whose name some of your readers may know. The point I am making is that I had a strong academic, intellectual, historical, and theological grounding in the Christian faith.

For a whole variety of reasons, at age 35, I found myself living with my family at Pendle Hill, which was established near Philadelphia in 1930 by some Quaker luminaries as a living, learning community organized around Quaker faith and practice. I went to Pendle Hill, not because of Quakerism, which I knew very little about, but because my family and I wanted immersion in community living for a year to see where it might take us. It took us through a decade at Pendle Hill, where I became Dean of Studies and eventually, Writer in Residence.

The Quaker form of worship, practiced every morning, seven days a week at the Center, is essentially sitting in silence in an unadorned room with the chairs or benches arranged in a squared circle. Out of the silence sometimes arises what Quakers call "vocal ministry," people speaking from their depths, or as Quakers would say, from "that of God within them," the Inner Teacher. They minister out of the silence with words of many sorts, sometimes words of anguish or despair, at other times, words of praise or hope and

everything in-between. It all depends on how the Spirit is moving in the speaker. Quakers were given their nickname because in the early days, as is still the case today, when a person is moved by the Spirit to speak out of the silence of the meeting, he or she may experience a quaking or quivering, a kind of seismic spiritual event that suggests something of significance is moving in them and wants to be expressed through them. So, the name "Quaker" is very much associated with their mode of worship.

My personal story is that sitting in this silence seven days a week, week after week, month after month, caused my received Christian faith to fall apart. As I mentioned earlier, I had a strong intellectual grasp on my faith. I had the history. I had the theology. What I didn't have was the lived experience. Sitting in silence, with no clergy person or liturgy or order of worship to prop me up, I had to honestly acknowledge that I didn't know experientially what I was talking about.

Lived experience is such a key component, isn't it?

Yes, I was just thinking the other day of a Quaker songwriter and poet named Sydney Carter who wrote a beautiful song, with which many people are familiar, called *Lord of the Dance*. In it he says, "Your holy hearsay is not evidence. Give me the good news in the present tense." These very simple words summed up my dilemma at the time. My head was full of holy hearsay, but I didn't have any present tense good news to speak because that deeper part of me had not opened up to spiritual experience. This was my very challenging introduction to what many people would call the mystical stream of Christianity in which the emphasis is not on language or concepts; the emphasis is on one's personal experience of God and the work of the Spirit. This was the

blessing of sitting in silence at Pendle Hill, of being in a community where such things could be discussed. Quakers have a very open form of Christian faith that does not stand in judgment of other people. It's part of their nonviolent witness or presence in the world. They don't have creeds you have to sign up for. The invitation in a Quaker meeting or local church is to live the experience rather than sign on the dotted line for this or that propositional truth. In this context, of silence and the challenge of silence, I saw the collapse of my own faith around my ears. Within a community of people who very graciously held my anger and despair about the foundations of my life disappearing from beneath my feet, I had the opportunity to start rebuilding from the ground up.

I began to realize that I did have experiences of God. In fact, "good news in the present tense" was happening all the time, I just wasn't aware of it or awake to it. I wasn't paying attention. I was living too much in my head. My slow movement towards Quakerism started with its challenge to my received faith but was carried forward by that community's way of holding me in this crisis and giving me a very hospitable space in which to rebuild.

Can you share a specific way in which your faith has influenced your decision making?

In a way, it is difficult for me to think of a decision in my mature years which hasn't been influenced by my faith. My journey in general has been a kind of upstream swim, of making decisions that go against the grain. For example, I obtained my Ph.D. with the expectation surrounding me that I would become a college professor. However, as quickly as possible, I left the traditional academic setting to become a community organizer and a fellow traveler with Quakers in

alternative education. For the past twenty-five years, I have worked independently. When I made this decision, it involved being very uncertain about my income, feeling quite invisible compared to my friends who had institutional affiliations and titles and a career track to move on. So, I faced a lot of darkness and a lot of doubt and anxiety. Looking back now from age sixty-eight, it is sometimes hard to remember how marginal I once felt, how frightened, how

“Your holy
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is not
evidence.
Give me
the good
news in
the present
tense.”

alone, and how powerfully faith played a role in supporting me during such times.

When I use the word faith here, I am not only talking about an individual commitment or set of beliefs, or even deeper still, a personal lived experience of what might be called the graciousness of the universe or the hospitality of the Spirit. I am also talking about communities of people, variously configured and defined, who can hold a person in generative space and help a person stay with his/her calling. I was only able to keep going in light of the whole idea of calling, or vocation, in the deepest sense of what this means. I believe the faith I was able to reconstruct experientially at Pendle Hill has been powerfully influential in my entire upstream swim. My writing and my work is now reasonably well established, embraced and accepted in the world. This includes the academic world of the university, one I thought I was leaving but instead have found myself serving from the outside over the years.

I often talk with young people who seek me out, having read one book or another, and they say, “You know, I have

dreams for my life, but I don't know what the signs are for which dream I should follow." I have responded that the most important vocational decisions I made in my life were not made because I was wildly enthusiastic about taking a huge risk or making less money than I would have otherwise, or baffling my family and friends about why I was doing what I was doing. I didn't cheerfully make these decisions to put myself on the edge. I made these decisions because I couldn't *not* make them. This idea cuts close to the bone for me about what faith does in our lives. Faith takes us to a place where we do what we do because it is integral to who we are. We take this step, take this risk, seize this opportunity because it is essential to us to express our own truth and we hope to serve other people in the process.

You spoke a bit about worship in the Quaker tradition, sitting in silence and waiting to be moved. Is this how you define prayer?

There is a very simple definition of prayer in the Quaker tradition—prayer is listening. It is listening for what Quakers call "that of God" in every person. There are a variety of ways of putting Quaker language to this—such as the Inner Teacher, the Inner Light, the Seed of Christ. There are all kinds of ways of talking about "that of God" in every person. In prayer we listen for that inner voice that is so often muffled or obscured by all kinds of static, both inside and outside of us. So, prayer is first about getting ourselves into a place where the rush and the pressure of modern life can fade into the background and we can slow down so we are not standing in the middle of a freeway, as it were. Then, prayer is about recognizing that some of the speeding and clanging and clamoring is going on inside of us. It is not all external, not by a long shot.

The activity of prayer is not about any particular technique. Quakers don't recommend any techniques because for them

prayer is about any way you have of stilling your heart, so inner listening can go on. The concept is that a human being is not an empty vessel—which I am afraid is how human beings get treated in a lot of our institutions, including educational and religious ones. People are sometimes treated as if they don't have anything inside of them unless they are filled up from the outside by someone else's version of what is good and true and beautiful.

This is just one person's bias, but it sharpens my point to note that in a lot of churches, when a moment of silence is called for, the silence may be 30 seconds long at the outside, and there is an organ playing or a choir singing. I have to ask myself, what are they afraid of? Why do they not want to listen, even for 30 seconds, in real silence? Of course, there is an answer to this question. When we do take the inner journey and listen, we have to work our way through all the things that are troubling us. When we hear the inner truth, it may not come as a high compliment. It is always a voice saying, "I love you," but it may be saying, "I love you and...there are some things we need to work on." Through this kind of prayer we are taken to a place of real challenge, if, in fact, we are getting in touch with "that of God."

It is important to remember in the Quaker tradition that there is the strong emphasis on the Inner Teacher or "that of God" in every person and there is an equally strong emphasis on the importance of community as a place to test whatever a person thinks his/her inner leading might be. Quakers are well aware that we are capable of fooling ourselves about our truth—in ways that feed our own egos or support some script we have for our lives that we want to bulwark and defend. So, testing our inner leadings in community and having a chance to engage in self-correction is valuable. It is not that the

community is going to tell you that you are wrong. Quakers don't operate that way. But you are going to have a chance to listen to various perspectives on truth, and in that sifting and sorting process, that winnowing of the wheat from the chaff, you're going to have a chance to correct your own distortions. It doesn't happen immediately. It often isn't clear right away, but my experience is that it does happen over time. Prayer in the Quaker tradition has an inner dimension of listening as well as an outer dimension of speaking and testing what it is that we think we have heard inwardly.

People often talk about the power of prayer and what it can do for one's self or another person. How have you experienced the power of prayer in your own life, or would you even use that phrase to describe it?

I appreciate your tenderness in asking whether this is a phrase I would use because it is not a phrase that comes easily to me. I have heard it misused so often. In fact, I have to say honestly that there is a lot of Christian language that I feel very squeamish about anymore. It has been so badly distorted, taken hostage by people who have political agendas, or used by those who have a lot more confidence that they speak for God than I think any human being has a right to have. I do think I know what the phrase "power of prayer" means, however. There is great power in listening and in testing in community what one thinks one has heard. One of the things in the Quaker tradition that puts this idea in a larger historical context is that Quakers are a very small group, only 100,000 in the United States, and another 100,000 throughout the rest of the world. This is a tiny population compared to that of other denominations, meaning Quakers have been disproportionately represented in addressing a

lot of the great social issues of our time, in the places where people of faith should be found—in war and peace, race relations and reconciliation. There has been an extraordinary Quaker presence in these movements around the globe, especially when compared to the small numbers of Friends available for this work. Much of this is related to the power of prayer, rightly understood. When Quakers do inner journeying and testing in community, and do it patiently and deeply over a period of time to discern God’s will for their lives, they are generally empowered to witness for peace, or racial reconciliation, or economic justice. This doesn’t often happen when a national denominational office simply hands down the year’s social action agenda to local congregations who then have a difficult time finding people to serve on the social justice committees. Witnessing for social justice comes from the ground up. It comes from the heart of life. This is how I understand the power of prayer.

In your book *Let Your Life Speak* you wrote, “Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth, whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us.” How do you think this insight applies to the religious political conflicts that we are facing in today’s world?

Well, I think it is a wonderful question because so many of today’s religious political conflicts are grounded in the notion that people with religious beliefs have decided they speak for God because they have it absolutely right. Some of them are so clear and so convinced about their position that they think it is their right to take the life of anyone who disagrees with them. They see it as their mission. I find this to be a false and pernicious mission on the very face of it because while there is a lot about God that I don’t know, and there is a lot about God that will always remain a mystery to the

human mind, I find it inconceivable that God wants anything other than life upon life, upon life, upon life. God wants life so much, that even death becomes resurrection in the economy of God, in God's mercy and power. I don't just mean this in the sense of the resurrection of Jesus, or in the sense that someone who has physically died remains with us. I am saying this as someone who three times in life has journeyed with very profound clinical depression, which is probably about as close to death as I will ever come in life, and yet has found new life on the other side. So I am speaking about an experiential reality for me—that God wants life, not death. When someone says, "I am so clear about my truth being God's truth and anyone who disagrees with me deserves to die"—I think they are speaking, not for God but for the devil. I would like a chance to talk with them about that!

Simone Weil (1909-1943), one of my spiritual heroes, a radical French Christian, deeply engaged at the intersection between Christianity and social justice, once said, "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth." I think this statement says a lot about what the Christian tradition calls "freedom in Christ." It truly is freedom from anyone's particular concept, formulation, creed or theology, attempting to capture the truth in verbal form. This is what I meant when I said, "Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth, whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us." We don't have marching orders for faith that give us a detailed daily description about what is in and what is out. This is a huge

The first
step to peace
is to stand
still in the
Light.

~George Fox

journey that we are on, a huge adventure. We are companioned by a God who wants life for all of us and wants us to be witnesses *to* life, bringers *of* life, carriers *of* life on behalf of other people.

There is a quotation from scripture that has been with me from a very young age. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) I feel deeply from my own experience that what this statement means is that we have earthen vessels like church structures and theological formulations, priestly offices, the pope, or books of Quaker faith and practice, you name it, every religion has them. Are these earthen vessels valuable? Of course they are, because they have held and carried the treasure over time, but we dare not confuse the earthen vessels with the treasure they carry. They are not the same thing. Evidence shows that we keep shattering the earthen vessels. Theology has changed a great deal since the 4th century. Creeds have changed. Concepts of God have changed. Church structures have changed and thank God for it. We really wouldn't want to be living under centuries-old conditions in the church today. So, we make a huge mistake when we say that *my* earthen vessel is to be preserved while yours is to be destroyed, or everybody is supposed to fit all the treasure inside *my* earthen vessel. This is not the way it works and when we try to make it work that way, we have forgotten the last part of that statement which is we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. This forgetfulness is the source of a huge amount of confusion in the world today and really takes us deeper and deeper into the very violence that God abhors.



You have focused a great deal of your life's work on education and teaching, and you say that you conceive of education as a spiritual journey. Could you speak to this conviction with some additional specific examples from your own life experience as a teacher or a learner?

Every subject taught in an educational institution from physics to literature to mathematics to political science is, in effect, a way of looking at common aspects of creation. It is a lens upon this amazing reality in which we are embedded. It is a partial lens, to be sure, but to be fascinated with literature, or history, or physics, is to say that something in me finds this particular lens upon the world compelling. I am not here just to collect facts. I am here to peer deep into reality from the angle through this lens to learn more, to try to understand more about the mystery in which our lives are embedded, in which they are wrapped and held. The best teachers I know are people who are passionate for a way of seeing and being in the world. When they are teaching a class, it is not just about having their students learn facts, commit them to memory and feed them back on a test, although this may be a small part of it. Their real invitation to their students is to see the world from this angle, to understand their own lives from this angle, and to find their lives have been transformed as a result of this way of seeing and being.

I have a son who is a biologist, and his study of biology began with a very gifted teacher when he was an undergraduate. It really changed his life to be given eyes for seeing who he was as a creature of this world, and what his responsibilities were toward the ecosystem of all creatures. Whether he characterizes this as a spiritual journey or not, it seems profoundly true to me that it is. I would define spirituality as any way we have of responding to the internal

human quest and need to be connected with something larger than our own egos. To be connected with a part of the vastness of history, or nature, or the world of the imagination is to be on a spiritual journey. If we are open to it, it will change our lives. I don't think the spiritual journey is confined to journeys that are bound by creedal statements or theological language. It seems to me that God is God of everything, the God of all creation. There is simply no way to get educated without looking at God's creation through a variety of lenses, from a variety of angles.

As I hear you say this, I am reminded of some of the Buddhists who are connected with us here at Fellowship in Prayer. I think they would greatly appreciate your comments about the ego.

I do think that Eastern religions have a deeper sense of some of the things we have been talking about than we have in Christianity. It is a shame that Christians keep a "theological distance" from the Eastern traditions, because when I read the New Testament, I don't see Jesus going around teaching people propositions. He teaches people ways of seeing and being in the world which are very embodied. It baffles me how the faith tradition I treasure so much, without which I wouldn't know how to understand my own life or the world around me, which is supposed to be about incarnation and embodiment, has become so much about propositions that we are supposed to sign up for.

Can you speak now about how you have taken your Quaker faith and practice into the world through the Center for Courage & Renewal that you founded a decade ago.

Our work at the Center for Courage & Renewal really involves helping people listen to their Inner Teacher. We can

find it hard to hold onto identity and integrity when so many institutions treat us as if this were not true. It is one of the tragedies of life that we start out with the huge gift of being whole integrated selves but as we get older each of us learns that bringing ones own identity and integrity into the world can be dangerous. Look at a little kid and you don't see any walls of separation between what's inside and outside. As I like to say, half jokingly, whatever is on the inside of an infant or small child comes immediately to the outside, both figuratively and literally. Kids don't start out having a governor inside of them who says, "I need to play this close to the vest, or hide my own truth behind a wall," but when kids are dismissed, marginalized in a whole variety of ways for letting their true selves show up, they start hiding out. Thomas Merton observes that most of us live lives of self-impersonation. For myself and many people I know, there is instant recognition of this truth and the belief that it is too high a price to pay. There are those among us who want to be present in the world with our true selves, doing our work and conducting our relationships from a place of personal integrity and wholeness.

At the Center of Courage & Renewal, we translate principles of Quaker faith and practice into language and practices that can work creatively in a secular pluralistic society where we owe deep respect to the diversity of the human condition. Over the past decade, we have touched the lives of about 25,000 people in 30 states and 50 cities around the country with our team of 160 very carefully prepared facilitators. We have been helping people in the serving professions and other walks of life to "reconnect soul and role," my shorthand description of what we are about. The Center has a tag line that reads "reconnecting who you are with what you do." So this is not only about Quaker stuff, it is about human stuff, bringing

human identity and integrity more fully into the lives we lead and the work we do. For example, if you are a doctor, you are going to serve your patients better; if you are a teacher, you are going to serve your students better; if you're a parent you will serve your children better. When human identity and integrity show up in any line of work, things happen that do not happen otherwise—good things, life giving things—things that do not happen when we wear masks or hide behind our roles and our authority. We have many, many testimonies from participants in the program about the renewal that has occurred in their own lives and in the lives of the people they serve and the institutions in which they work.

It has had a ripple effect then as the participants carry what they learn out to the many other people whose lives they touch.

Absolutely! I have always held the conviction that if you do honest inner work, you're never doing it selfishly and this program has proven my conviction to be true. You're never doing this kind of work for yourself alone because it is going to ripple out into the lives of everyone you touch. In the final analysis, the only gift that any of us has to bring to the world is the gift of true self. Anything we can do to preserve, to reclaim, to deepen our own grasp of the birthright gift of our own identity and integrity is ultimately done on behalf of other people. Of this, I am deeply convinced.

Thank you so much for sharing the gift of who you are!

ILLUMINATIONS



The life that intends to be wholly obedient, wholly submissive, wholly listening, is astonishing in its completeness. Its joys are ravishing, its peace profound, its humility the deepest, its power world-shaking, its love enveloping, its simplicity that of a trusting child.

~ *Thomas Kelly*

Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.

~ *Rumi*

Show me the path where I should go, point out the right road for me to walk. Lead me: teach me.

~ *Psalm 25*

To turn all we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives.

~ *John Woolman*

The best way to say, 'I love you, God,' is to live your life doing your best. The best way to say, 'Thank you, God,' is by letting go of the past and living in the present moment, right here and now.

~ *Don Miguel Ruiz*

Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy.

~ *Abraham Heschel*

There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies. My brain and my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.

~ *HH The Dalai Lama*

Learning to understand our dreams is a matter of learning to understand our heart's language.

~ *Ann Faraday*

Your work is to discover your world and then with all your heart give yourself to it.

~ *Buddha*

He who learns the rules of wisdom without conforming them to his life is like a man who plows in his field but does not sow.

~ *Sa'di, Islam*

Nature is so full of genius, full of Divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand.

~ *Henry David Thoreau*

The eye that sees nobility and beauty in what another would regard as ordinary is the eye of prayer.

~ *Wendy Beckett*

I discovered the secrets of the sea in meditation upon a dewdrop.

~ *Kahlil Gibran*

The older you get, the more you realize that kindness is synonymous with happiness.

~ *Lionel Barrymore*

Circles of Life

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



It was late at night when we drove to a secluded, dimly-lit house. We had prearranged to meet with a Buddhist monk but had to postpone the meeting until this late hour because the monk needed to make an emergency visit to someone in the hospital.

In the night's shadows, I could scarcely make out the large sitting Buddha near the entrance of the house. But what caught my attention was the metal circle with spokes resembling a wheel, hanging over the figure of the Buddha.

We approached the door to find shoes of every size and description filling the entry way. We could hear muffled chanting from somewhere inside. Soon, after our tentative knock on the door, a young monk appeared and led us upstairs where we sat and had a fascinating discussion with another monk. We were offered tea, and we noticed how everyone deferred in reverence to our host. Only later did we discover that we had been sitting

A frequent writer for Fellowship in Prayer, Susan Gregg-Schroeder is coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church. Please visit her at www.mentalhealthministries.net.

at the feet of a Master teacher who had founded monasteries all over the world, including his native Thailand, Norway and Australia.

After I had finally managed to somewhat discreetly sit cross-legged while balancing my cup of sweet tea, I began to look around. Noticing that the Buddha in the room had the same “wheel” above his head, I asked our host about the wheel. I was told that it represented our eternal journey in this life, continuing into the next.

Buddha’s teachings say that life is suffering. We cannot avoid suffering as we move in the rim of the wheel which represents perpetual change and the transitory nature of life. But the wheel also symbolizes wholeness or completion because the wheel revolves around a center axis that does not move. That center point represents the presence of the divine. If we remain aware of this center point, we are strengthened for whatever lies ahead.

I couldn’t help but reflect on the many religious traditions that use the circle as a symbol for our spiritual journey. I recalled the deep meanings surrounding the Native American Medicine Wheel. Others that came to mind include the Celtic cross with its intertwining circles and the ancient mazes and labyrinths of medieval cathedrals.

All these circles of life have a center. It is this center point that grounds us in the midst of the many changes in our lives. It is at the center point where we connect with the Everywhere Spirit.

When we rest in the center point, we find that we have come home again to the place from which we started. But because of the journey, it is as if we had arrived home for the first time. In our journey around the circles of life, we become new persons over and over again.

P O E T R Y



Solitude

Sue Coppernoll

In the stillness is a solace
Born of the void,
Spanning eternity.

In the silence is a symphony
Rising on the wind,
Stirring the soul.

In the quietude is a serenity
Formed of inaction,
Reforming inspiration.

In the cessation is the sacred
Made manifest,
Calling forth adoration.

In the present is a presence
Encircling the spirit,
Unfolding the divine within.

Sue Coppernoll is ordained in the Church of the Brethren and serves as a pastoral counselor and director of Women's Spirituality Retreats. She is committed to the arts as pathways of healing and peace.



Deer Watch

John Petrenka

Morning: tracks in the snow
on the front lawn and elsewhere,
evidenced the overnight visit of deer.
This evening, I stand outside, listening
in dim light, a grayish aura,
cast by a blending of dark sky
and white snow.
The air is crisp, all is stillness.
Will deer come?
I listen, for what—I'm not sure.
The stillness has a voice
that speaks the language of presence,
heard only in a solitude of deep listening.
The moon, near full, highlights the tracks;
my effort at solitude falters,
yet—I listen.

John Petrenka, whose religious heritage is Byzantine, completed his theological and liturgical studies at Catholic University of America. His work includes counseling with the handicapped and disabled. He makes his home with his wife, Marge, in Emmaus, Pennsylvania.

The More We Own
The Less We Have To Name
Wilmer Mills, "Black Skimmers on the Gulf Coast"
L. N. Allen

If we had only one coat, we would call it *Warm*,
but if we got another, it would not be *Warmer*,
just our other coat,
and if we bought, borrowed, stole
or rescued from the trash
a third, fourth, or fifth coat,
if our closets held so many coats
jackets, parkas, capes, stoles, mantles and mackinaws
that if we changed them daily from October through April,
rotating cashmere, leather, fleece and down,
scarlets and peacocks, blacks and browns,
if we had coats to cover the entire tundra
and with it all our ancestors
who ever felt the chill of His absence,
none of these would be *Warmer*,
none of these would be *Enough*.

L.N. Allen has published literary and science fiction stories under the name Lori Negridge Allen for many years. Her stories gradually shrank to short stories, then to prose poems, then to lined free verse and formal poetry. Her work has appeared in The Southern Review, Tundra and The New Hampshire Review.

Contemplating a Glory

Heinz Stucki



I'm a glory chaser—of the natural kind, that is. Related to a rainbow, a glory is the appearance in a fog bank of a ring of colors around the shadow of a person's head.

Glories are also called *Brocken specters* after the peak in the Harz Mountains of Germany where climbers above the clouds often see them. Fully experiencing one requires a journey to the high ground, both physically and spiritually. Here at our home in Appalachia, I see one occasionally in the fall or spring.

Today I hike to the crest of our hill to await the sunrise. There's a chill in the air as I sit in the field. My heavy sweatshirt feels cozy. Below me a mist rises from our pond and flows to a spot where the earth folds like an arm to snuggle against. My extended shadow appears there in the moments after the full orb of the sun pops above the horizon. Gradually, like a blush on Gaia's

Heinz Stucki holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Wisconsin. He works in the polymers industry, as well as directs a community development agency. He is also an adjunct instructor at Wheeling Jesuit University's Leadership program. Heinz was born in Switzerland but now lives on 43 beautiful Appalachian acres!

cheek, a faint glow builds and a glory materializes from the depth. Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* would be an appropriate overture, but played ever so softly. And then there is silence—in the world and in me. Like a peacock spreading its plumage, it assumes its full color. Its rings form a mandala. For an enchanted moment I feel part of the consciousness in which I am embedded. Eventually, like Venus in the eastern sky, the glory fades into the emerging day. I am left energized, at equilibrium with the world. The inchoate dawn breeze sets sail to my spirit.

Newton long ago explained the rainbow when he demonstrated how a prism refracts the white light of the sun into the colors of the spectrum, but physics' theory for a glory remains unfinished. We know that the reflection of the sun by the fog droplets is analogous to the reflection of headlights in a deer's eyes or from a luminescent freeway sign. But a glory doesn't materialize without the participation of an observer and two people looking at the same glory will each see it centered on themselves. The more mystical aspects of quantum mechanics come to mind: a particle isn't a particle until it's observed—it's just a potential. So it is with a glory.

While the mathematical equations that purport to describe a glory are elegant, they pale before the spiritual catharsis of the reality. The words of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart seem relevant: "The eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me." In the West, glories were once icons of power and holiness; the crowns of kings and the halos of saints were inspired by glories. In the East, glories are known as Buddha's light and are symbols of enlightenment. If

a rainbow is the symbol of God's covenant that the earth will not flood again, a glory is His sign that all is one and that I have my part therein.

Glory by Heinz Stucki



PRAYERS



Coming and Goings

Breath of life,
You ride the waves of life with me
in the rhythms of my communion with you.
You enter the comings and goings
of each day and in every prayer I breathe.
Whether I am in the stillness of quiet prayer
or in the fullness of the day's activity,
may your peace flow through my being.

~ From Prayer by Joyce Rupp

Prayer for All Seasons

For the order and constancy of nature;
For the beauty and bounty of the world;
For day and night, summer and winter, seed time and
harvest;
For the varied gifts of loveliness and use which every
season brings:
We praise thee.

~ John Hunter

From Bless This Food

Something in My Heart

Something in my heart

Homes in on the simple truth:
Longing for You
Is all there is.

Reaches across eons,
Swimming through currents of unfolding destiny
To find Your shore.

Calls out with each breath,
Unable to quiet the yearning
That courses through my soul.

Something in my heart

Wanders ever-toward You
Seeking forever
The holy touch of Love

~ Elizabeth Heaney

Living Breath

Sow in me your living breath,
As you sow a seed in the earth.

~ Kadya Molodowsky

From Woman Prayers

*Elizabeth Heaney lives in the Southwest desert and works as a psychotherapist.
Her spiritual mentor is Meher Baba and she has a great love for all faiths.*

Meditation on Listening

I offer you the word, "Listen." Listen. Listen. Listen to the sounds of the sanctuary that surround you. Sounds that surround you now. Sounds that have surrounded you in other services, in other activities, in other moments of quiet, in other moments of joy. Listen to the quiet. Especially the quiet.

Listen. Listen to the voice within that speaks of the sanctity of this place. Listen to the voices of those around you, voices of relationship. What are those voices telling you about yourself? Listen.

When you are through listening to the voices within, the voices without, then open your eyes and live with awareness.

~ Susan M. Wolinsky

*From For Praying Out Loud
Interfaith Prayers for Public
Occasions*

Lord, Speak to Me

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of your love to each person I meet today.

~ Glen Floe

*From Christ in Our Home
Oct-Dec 2007*

A REFLECTION



Qualities for Eldering

Ina Albert

These are the qualities by which I chose to guide my life in my elder years. But, in order to be tangible, they had to have character; they had to come alive so that I could include them in my everyday struggle to become whole. They are role models based on women I have known who personify these qualities for me. Their example makes it possible for me to fulfill life's blessings.

Integrity is clear about most everything. When she is not, she sits down and thinks hard about how to keep herself feeling like a whole piece of cloth without a single tear or rip. She loves seeing patterns come together, and pretty soon she knows what to do. She has abundant patience, inner strength and wisdom, but she never tells others what to do. She simply helps them discover what is right for them.

Connection relates to everything and everyone. She is an optimist and a toucher. She loves to hug and tells Health that they must hug each other thirteen times a day to stay well. Connection also talks to trees and plants and rocks and to God every day. She is joined to every cell in her body, to every living creature, and relates to the planet

As a healthcare public relations professional for over thirty-five years, Ina Albert has written numerous articles for healthcare publications. She recently co-authored Write Your Self Well...Journal Your Self to Health. The author lives and writes in Whitefish, Montana.



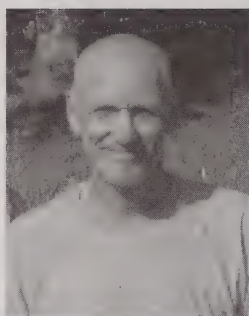
and the whole Universe. She says you have to be connected to feel alive and to be holy.

Health is a strong woman. She jogs every day, eats organic food, thinks good thoughts, meditates and prays. Her body is supple, but she sees changes in her skin and feels tightness in her joints. She needs more rest than she used to and sometimes forgets things. But she has gathered more wisdom, her heart is open and she is calm. As Health reaches elderhood, she is growing deeper inside rather than getting stronger outside.

Spirit is the mother of everything. Since she is the ultimate creator, she is in everything and is everywhere. Yet, she is invisible. You can only feel her presence. As Spirit creates, she leaves her seeds behind to grow which makes her the strongest force there is. Lots of people have relationships with Spirit, though she never utters a single word. Somehow, she sends messages without talking out loud.

The End of Experience

E. Raymond Rock



“What’s happening?” “What have you been up to?” “What’s going on in your life?” We use these types of greetings every day in lives filled with things to do.

Any break in these nonstop activities is uncomfortable; when someone asks what is going on in our lives, it’s not cool to say, “Nothing.” We would be considered boring—not at all fun to be around. Therefore, we spice it up; TV, the internet, movies, going here and there, relationships, family, friends, religion, careers, hobbies; they all contribute to make our lives interesting and active. A full life.

This is how we work through the stages of our lives; the student, the householder, maybe later politics or religion, and perhaps we even write a book in an attempt to leave for posterity any wisdom we might have acquired along the way.

E. Raymond Rock is co-founder and principal teacher at the Southwest Florida Insight Center. His twenty-eight years of meditation experience have taken him across four continents, including Thailand, where he practiced in the remote northeast forests as an ordained Theravada Buddhist monk. He authored A Year to Enlightenment. For more information see www.AYearToEnlightenment.com.

This is everyday life. This is all there is. To reach beyond this involves reaching beyond existence as we know it, beyond experience, and few are inclined to do this. The saints, the sages, the visionaries throughout history have gone there, but have always been misunderstood at best and persecuted at worst, because what they have discovered is not for everyone—it scares people!

If you are one of the courageous few who may be interested in what the saints and sages discovered, read on; if not—if you are happy with your life and satisfied to live out its predictable stages, this is a good place to stop and perhaps read something more interesting.

When I first entered a Zen Buddhist monastery for training almost thirty years ago, I was told that Zen is everyday life. This I didn't want to hear; I didn't believe them. I was at a Zen monastery to escape everyday life through the magic and mysticism of Zen meditation. I didn't realize at the time, and it took me many years to realize, that everyday life is the gateway to something far greater; that about which the saints and sages whisper.

Everyday life is an aphorism for emptiness; not expecting more than what this mundane existence has to offer. Regardless of how we try to spice up life with endless pursuits and diversions, life seeks its own level, just as water does, and sooner or later life settles down into everydayness. The trick is to accept this everydayness instead of escaping it, and use its predictability and peace to launch the mind into an unknown area of life; so wonderful, yet so foreign to everyday existence that the mind can unfortunately become frightened.

This is the point where many "truth seekers" bow out. The comfort of activity and the security of experiencing remain too compelling, and the seeker returns to the

world. The fact is, if he or she didn't return to the world, they would soon be faced with the other world, and since in the other world they no longer exist, they are better off going back to their familiar bondage rather than risk disappearing and becoming unbalanced! This is why deeper meditation is not recommended for anyone with psychological issues, unless sanctioned by their mental health care professional. If the rug is pulled out too quickly, and our illusions shattered too abruptly, we can easily become unbalanced if we don't have direct access to a teacher.

One of the benefits of deeper meditation is that unless you have an underlying psychological problem, correct meditation will never permit you to venture further than you safely should. Meditation, little by little, infuses courage, and only reveals to you what your accumulated courage can handle. For example, in the other world, existence, as we know it . . . doesn't exist! The other world and this world are no different, since we are but the conscious aspects of the pure awareness of that other world. In our minds, however, the other world is alien, even though this is the world of "God" that many speak so loosely about, and it can initially be a scary place for worldly based minds that depend upon their existence and experience for security.

But good things happen when one's courage, accumulated through either meditation or a spontaneous emptying of the mind, allows one to peek at the other world, a world beyond experience. Beyond experience means just that, no recollection of what has transpired—no registration in the conscious mind at all. This emptiness, however, this seemingly unconsciousness, is

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fully aware, without consciousness at a level so deep that it could never surface to a conscious knowing.

This unconscious awareness is the other world. This means that as a human being, you are one of those rare individuals, like the sages and saints—the visionaries—who have touched the other world, who have touched what some call God.

This is not the same as a feeling of God in you, or a vision of God; feelings and visions are within existence and caught within experience, and we can remember them. Pure awareness is something quite different from that—pure awareness is touching something so fundamental that your entire life changes, and although you can't recall what has happened, the more you dwell in that other world of pure awareness, the more the present world falls away, until both worlds merge. The Zen "Ox Herding Pictures," ten stages of becoming fully aware of your fundamental true nature represents this beautifully.

When experience ends, when we are no longer conscious but entirely aware, this is where destinies change. This is where we look back and see that our sensory perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions (and where they lead us), can easily be described by some as illusion at best, and the "Devil" at worst! When we live our lives directly from awareness, all the stale ideals and conceptions fade in the presence of pure awareness. Then we are spontaneous, and then we act with enlightened minds.

This would be the pinnacle of human development. This is the answer for which we have been searching; this is coming face-to-face with God. This is the end of experience, and the beginning of pure awareness.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



The Clearness Committee

The Religious Society of Friends has a unique practice to support their community members when someone is faced with a difficult decision or dilemma. Put simply, Friends ask other Friends to help them discern the will of God, the leading of the Spirit in their lives. This gathering of Friends is called a Clearness Committee. Behind it is a simple but crucial spiritual conviction: each of us has an inner, divine light that gives us the guidance we need but is often obscured by sundry forms of inner and outer interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice, alter or “fix” people but to help people remove obstacles and discover the divine assistance that is within. Some individuals are blessed with a gift for discernment—they seem to know immediately what they are called to do. Others must come to decisions with more effort, help and encouragement. Through silence, questioning, listening, and prayer, the Clearness Committee helps people to bring their understandings and confusions; hopes and fears; ambitions and desires into the Light. Dealing with weighty matters or coming to a decision in a difficult time can be a lonely experience. A Clearness Committee reminds people that they are part of a community. While asking for the aid of a Clearness Committee is not a guarantee of an immediate and perfect answer, it does

allow for sharing burdens, reflecting on options, and listening for leadings from the Spirit. The purpose of the committee is not to give answers but to ask clarifying questions, to be fellow seekers, and to reflect the Light, that spark of the Divine within the person who is struggling to find his/her way.

The guidelines for a Clearness Committee include the following:

1. The person seeking clearness chooses a committee of five or six trusted individuals with as much diversity as possible among them.
2. The focus person then precisely summarizes his/her situation in a written statement and circulates it to the committee members.
3. A facilitator is named to open, close the committee meeting, and make sure the committee serves the intention for which it was formed—to offer spiritual assistance with discernment.
4. The meeting begins with a period of centering silence.
5. The focus person speaks about his/her situation and the committee members then ask honest, caring, and challenging questions in a paced and gentle way. Any questions that arise out of curiosity or masquerade as advice or judgment are dismissed.
6. The focus person responds to questions, briefly and concisely, perhaps choosing not to answer certain questions in order to protect privacy.

7. When the focus person has reached clearness, the work of the Committee ceases.

Clearness takes time and is best described as a deep inner certainty that comes from spiritual discernment rooted in God's grace and supported in community. Utilizing a Clearness Committee is a spiritual discipline, not without its own dangers. However, when it is properly understood and embraced, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, drawing deeply on "that of God" within each one of us.

Information for this article was adapted from the Friends General Conference website, www.fgcquaker.org and the article Prayer Methods; Making Decisions, from Upper Room Ministries at www.upperroom.org

The Ambiance of Love

Jay Marshall



I think everyone wants to love and be loved, because love is powerful. It is a potent mixture of emotion and will that creates incredible resolve and commitment. It can change the mood of the moment and even transform an environment. We feel incredibly valued and safe when we receive love. When we give love, we enjoy the ability to make another person smile or encourage them to fulfill their dreams. Together, we strengthen and encourage each other with a mutuality of care.

Sometimes, love surprises us. It moves us to have affection for people we did not intend to care about. I have a friend who, with every ounce of her strength, resisted falling in love with the man she eventually married until finally she could only accept the attraction that stirred so deeply within her. Love prompts us to sacrifice things we want for ourselves because we would rather improve the quality of someone else's life than provide for our own gratification. We can probably all remember a pair of shoes or a week at camp where, for the sake of our needs or dreams, our parents simply did without something they needed in order to provide for us. From wedding vows to

Excerpted from Thanking & Blessing-The Sacred Art: Spiritual Vitality Through Gratefulness, by Jay Marshall, Ph.D. Published by Skylight Paths Publishing, © 2007 and used with permission. www.skylightpaths.com

prison visits, love, or the desire for it, motivates the commitments that keep us invested in each other's lives.

One of our greatest discoveries on the path of thanking and blessing is that love is already within our reach. Love surrounds us as completely as the air we breathe. It is a quality of God's fundamental attitude toward us. It is a mysterious and powerful force that, once experienced, can change our lives radically, heal wounds, eradicate fears, and shape the words and deeds that we offer the world. The love that flows from us in turn affects those around us, and we continue to participate in the ongoing, creative work of God.

LOVE AND GOD

The sacred art of thanking and blessing builds upon the convictions that humans are created in the image and likeness of God and that God's image and likeness take form in our lives. But what is God like? Many religious traditions understand love to be one of God's fundamental defining characteristics.

A common refrain in the Hebrew Bible describes God this way: "The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation. . ." (Exod. 34:6-7). It is a description I cherish, in large part because the Hebrew word *hesed* is translated here as kindness. "Steadfast love" is another common translation, though it fails to capture the power and depth of the word. *Hesed* is the quality of love that inspires trust and confidence in the face of adversity and peril. It is a tenacious love, a love at the core of God's covenantal commitment to God's people. *Hesed* assures that God has our best interests at heart.

Islam underscores the priority of love in the divine nature, referring to *ramah*, or love, as God's normal attitude toward humanity: "O our Sustainer! You embrace all things within love and knowledge" (Qu'ran 40:7). It is a patient, kind love, designed by Allah and beyond our complete comprehension.

Christianity equates God and love, as explicitly stated in 1 John: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; . . .for God is love"(1 John 4:7-8). Both the New Testament and several early Christian writers describe the love as *agape*, by which they mean an unconditional, nondiscriminating, self-giving love. Moreover, the New Testament understands Jesus as the ultimate example of this self-giving love that God offers to humanity. In turn, this love becomes the motivation for humans choosing to love others.

In short, God and love are inseparable from each other, as are humans from God's love. Few statements surpass the New Testament convictions of Romans 8 on this matter:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Rom. 8:38-9:1)

We are inseparable from God's love. That is an inviting concept, but how are we to think about this love and its effect upon us? After all, love has a funny way of working. It's not always logical, or direct, or even easily identified. I have come to think of love as a kind of ambience in my life—something that's real, and powerful, but not simple

to pin down. Just like the effects of lighting create an ambiance in a room—low, soft light for a romantic dinner or bright, colorful lights for a party—love’s glow affects perception and mood in sometimes subtle, yet very real ways. It can shape your attitude. It can electrify your whole being one minute and then fill you with profound gratitude the next. Love leaves us thoroughly undone but wonderfully remade.

If God is love and humans are made in the image of God, then our learning to love is a theological imperative. More than that, it is our invitation to step into that image by consciously imitating the divine love we experience and radiating it out to others. In the process, love provides perpetual energy for thanking God, transforming our abilities to engage others, and blessing those around us.

END PIECE



What Happens When We Do Not Let Go?

Joseph Goldstein

What happens when we do not let go? Asians have a very clever trap for catching monkeys. People hollow out a coconut, put something sweet in it, and make a hole at the bottom of the coconut just big enough for the monkey to slide its open hand in but not big enough for the monkey to withdraw its hand as a fist. They attach the coconut to the tree, and the monkey comes along and gets trapped.

What keeps the monkey trapped? Only the force of desire, of clinging, of attachment. All the monkey has to do is let go of the sweet, open its hand, slip it out, and be free. But only a very rare monkey will do that.

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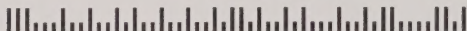
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Vol. 59, No. 1

February/March 2008

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ISSN 1096-5939

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